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30th Annual B.C. Aboriginal Elders Gathering

Premier Gordon Campbell July 18, 2006

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It is a pleasure to be here in the traditional territories of the Tseshaht First Nation and the Hupacasath First Nation and to share with you the 30th anniversary of the B.C. Elders Gathering. It is a pleasure to be here with the members of the B.C. Leadership Council, Chief Ed John, Chief Robert Shintah, Chief Stewart Phillip, Chief Mike Retasket, Chief Judith Sayers and, of course, Regional B.C. Chief Shawn Atleo of the Assembly of First Nations.

Yesterday I had the opportunity at the invitation of the Ahusaht people to come to visit their community, and I had the high honour of being given a name by Shawn Atleo. So today I can come to you and I can say for the first time at a major public gathering that my name is Chamatook.

It is also a pleasure to be here with my colleagues from the legislature, the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, Tom Christensen and the MLA for Alberni-Qualicum, Scott Fraser. We come here out of respect and to honour the contributions that elders have made to the present and to the future of British Columbia.

At a gathering of elders it's easy to make the mistake of thinking that this is a meeting about the past, but you know that the stories you tell and the ancestors who you remind us about are all very much a part of our future. This event is a gift to your children, to your grandchildren, to all the people of British Columbia, and for your perseverance let me say on behalf of the people of British Columbia: thank you.

As I thought about the contributions you've made over the last 30 years to keep alive your culture, your stories and your languages, I reflected on the hurdles you had to overcome and your perseverance in bringing your languages to us and to the young First Nations' children today. So often you paid a heavy price for policies of denial and practices of indifference, and so perhaps for all of you here today and for those elders who have not been able to come to Port Alberni, it is hardest to trust when a government speaks of respect and reconciliation and recognition.

But like this gathering, the new relationship is not just about facing up to the facts of our past, it's about imagining the future. The new relationship, like so many of your stories and traditions, speaks to the values of hope and perseverance, and today I acknowledge the leadership, commitment and guidance of the Leadership Council. The Council has helped map out a course which will make life better for all First Nations and all British Columbians. So, on behalf of British Columbians, let me say thank you for your leadership and your vision.

This room is filled with eyes that have seen many things in the past and minds that have much wisdom. I was looking at the Nuu-chah-nulth website, which features Nuu-chah-nulth elders talking about their culture. Richard Lucas recalls his grandmother teaching him that if you work hard, good results will come. And Wilfred Andrews remembers one of his teachers saying "you have to learn to act your way into a new way of thinking." That's what we are trying to do with the new relationship: act our way to a new way of thinking. And if we work hard, like Richard's grandmother said, good results will come of it.

Last week I was honoured to speak at the Assembly of First Nations and I made clear our province's commitment to close the social, economic, health and community gaps that currently divide many First Nations' communities from the rest of the province. Together, we will act to close those gaps and new actions will lead to new results.

It is unacceptable that Aboriginal high school graduation rates are nearly half of what non-Aboriginal graduation rates are. It is unacceptable that life expectancies for First Nations' people are about seven and a half years shorter than non-First Nations' people and that on-reserve households are twice as likely to be overcrowded as off-reserve households.

Our goal is to close those gaps and to share the prosperity of our province and our country with First Nations and non-First Nations. The time has passed for making excuses, the time has come for making changes – changes like the \$10 million we are committing to close the gap in mental health services for First Nations' children.

First Nations' communities today have a 400-percent greater rate of type 2 diabetes than non-First Nations' communities. That is not acceptable to us and I know it is not acceptable to you. And it is in an effort to honour your commitment to your communities that we will work to close that gap.

We will also work together to ensure that the lynchpin of our future, the education system in British Columbia, reflects First Nations' values and First Nations' traditions. Two weeks ago, the federal government joined with the provincial government and the First Nations Education Steering Committee to sign an historic agreement that will give your communities the opportunity and the right, should they desire, to create their own curriculum, their own certification system, and their own school system to meet the needs of First Nations' students.

I also know that many of you participate in the Elders in the Classroom program. That's a program we want to expand. It's a program that asks you to continue giving the gift of your stories and your knowledge and your traditions to First Nations' students and non-First Nations' students.

We believe it is time to realize what you have known about for so long - the strength, the diversity, and the wisdom of Aboriginal culture. We want to raise that culture up in First Nations' schools and non-First Nations' schools alike. We want to celebrate and revitalize your languages so First Nations' children have the opportunity to learn those languages and recognize who they are and where they came from. And we want to be part of a partnership that allows that to take place.

First Nations' culture has seen a powerful resurgence across our province. Last week I was fortunate enough to be invited to a celebration at the Skidegate Cultural Centre, where the province is contributing \$4 million to ensure that the centre can reach out to people not just across B.C. but around the world. The \$9 million Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre opened in Osoyoos last month. The U'mista Cultural Centre of Alert Bay is recognized around the world. The Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre is being created in time for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

Today, there is also a special presentation of northwest Aboriginal art at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. Thirteen First Nations are represented in that exhibition. Two are from Washington State. One is from Alaska. And ten of those First Nations who are sharing their culture at the Smithsonian come from British Columbia, Canada.

While we were in Torino celebrating the Olympics and looking forward to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, it was four First Nations, the Squamish,

the Lil'wat, the Tsleil-Waututh and the Musqueam, who invited the world to come to B.C. to celebrate with us the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. Those games are as much the games of the First Nations as they are the games of Canada or British Columbia or Vancouver or Whistler.

And in 2008, just two years away, the Cowichan Tribes will celebrate and host the 2008 North American Indigenous Games. First Nations' athletes have just returned from the North American Indigenous Games in Denver. They brought home 102 medals to the province. The Team B.C. swim team of just eight members, including Dan Ambrose from Port Alberni, won 50 medals in total at the North American Indigenous Games and 12 paddlers won 20 medals in canoeing for British Columbia.

Perhaps the most profound symbol of the rekindling of Aboriginal culture was the repatriation of the G'psgolox pole on National Aboriginal Day. The pole was taken from Haisla traditional territories in 1929, and after 15 years of work and effort that pole has come back from Sweden, crossed the Atlantic, crossed the country and found its rightful home back in the Haisla traditional territories. There, Haisla young people can look at that pole and remember their ancestors and know their stories and know their history and build their culture.

It is a great honour to be here with you today to speak to you about my hopes for a new relationship with British Columbians and about my hopes for a new relationship for First Nations' young people. I'd like to leave you with a thought from a philosopher who once said: "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it." British Columbia should be a place where dreams can be pursued and can be realized.

As I visited Ahousaht yesterday, I was given the recorded stories of Ahousaht young people who said they have a dream. In British Columbia we have a dream. We have a dream for a new relationship, for stronger families, for healthier communities. We have a dream where First Nations come with us and work with us to strengthen their culture, to strengthen our whole province.

You are the ones who were trusted to bring your stories forward. Thank you for that. Thank you for sharing your stories; thank you for reminding us of our history and thank you for helping us dream about the future that we can create together.

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